

Air Force Reviving Tunnel Plan for the MX Missile

By RICHARD BURT

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WASHINGTON, May 12 — The Defense Department, under pressure to come up with a workable plan for basing a new mobile intercontinental missile, has revived the idea of deploying the weapons in tunnels, officials say.

They said yesterday that a proposal for basing the missile, which is known as the MX, in tunnels in the Southwest was made at a White House meeting Thursday. The officials said that, as a result of the meeting, the tunnel proposal was now one of three final options under consideration. The others are said to be the shell-game basing plan, using underground silos, and scrapping the missile altogether in favor of a new submarine-launched missile.

The idea of deploying the MX in tunnels was abandoned a year ago on the ground that it would not give the missile adequate protection against a Soviet missile

attack. Instead, the Air Force developed the shell-game concept, in which about 250 of the missiles would be shuttled at random among several thousand underground silos. An enemy would not know at any one time where the missiles were.

While this approach has been judged technically feasible, its critics say that it poses verification problems. Since most silos would serve decoy purposes, the other side in an arms control accord may have difficulty counting missiles to insure that the total number conforms to an agreed limit.

As a result, the arms control officials have suggested that President Carter approve a new submarine-launched missile, the Trident II, which could also be deployed on land in existing silos.

The Air Force, fearing the possibility that the MX might be scrapped, is said to

have suggested that the technical problems of deploying the missile in underground tunnels could be solved. While the tunnel proposal, at an estimated cost of \$25 billion, would be more expensive than the shell-game approach, officials contend that it would pose a lesser problem of verification and was thus more likely to win the President's approval.

Under the tunnel plan, each missile would be placed on a railway car that would shuttle back and forth within a trench some 11 miles long. The trench would be covered with a blast-proof roof and, in time of war, parts of the roof could be slid back and the missile fired.

Under normal circumstances, the roof could also be removed periodically to allow Soviet surveillance satellites to keep track of missile numbers without revealing their exact location.